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Staff-student partnerships in Higher Education

SABINE LITTLE, 2010

London, Continuum

£75.00 Hardback

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Staff-student partnerships in higher education is published at a time of increasing interest in the idea of students as co-producers, co-creators and collaborators in their own learning and therefore is to be welcomed. This edited volume describes a wide range of initiatives taking place in England, Australia and Canada. Throughout the book, Wenger's concept of 'communities of practice' offers a useful framework to many of the ideas being presented.

In Chapter one, Philippa Levy, Sabine Little and Natalie Whelan outline a very useful broad overview of the literature and the place of staff-student partnerships in the current higher education context. The authors argue that we need to move away from the use of the term 'student voice' and towards a more collaborative idea of staff-student dialogue.

The next thirteen chapters cover a very wide range of different aspects of staff-student partnerships from a large number of authors writing collaboratively. Barnes and colleagues in chapter two describe partnerships within a student ambassador network and a student intern programme. In chapter three, Sambell and Graham describe an optional assessment module where students produce resources for other students and staff to enable them to engage in key concepts about assessment for learning.

Badge and colleagues, in chapter four have used student feedback to enhance student understanding of plagiarism in partnership between staff and a sabbatical officer and an education officer at the student union. While in chapter five, Harrington and colleagues describe an innovative collaborative writing initiative where students and staff contributed to an essay writing blog. Williams, and colleagues in chapter six describe medical students leading the development of online learning materials for other medical students.

In chapter seven, Potter and Collins outline the difficulties of setting up a postgraduate teaching recognition project run between the academic development centre and the student union. While in chapter eight, Gannon-Leary and colleagues describe a learning and teaching award scheme for students who suggest ideas to enhance the student experience. In chapter nine, Zaitseva and colleagues report on how student 'peer' tutors from drama took part in a scheme to tutor sports development students.

Kill and colleagues, in chapter ten, present their chapter as a narrative to a play. The authors describe their changing roles at different times in the process of their staff student partnerships using details from their specific partnership experiences over a range of projects. This is followed in chapter eleven, by Manning and colleagues describing their work involving staff creating a structured framework within which an advanced research methods course would be taught using a PBL methodology. The approach taken was negotiated between staff and students. Metcalfe and colleagues in chapter twelve explore critically the potential benefits and challenges of publishing a journal of undergraduate research.

In chapter thirteen, Wuetherick and McLaughlin explore student perceptions of research opportunities and experiences. Using a partnership approach between university administration and a university student union, they discuss a range of potential staff student partnerships. Finally, Sharp and colleagues in chapter fourteen, describe a writing project involving staff-student partnership.

In the concluding chapter of this book, Sabine Little, Heather Sharp, Linda Stanley, Marie Hayward, Pat Gannon-Leary, Peter O'Neill and Jane Williams draw together some key themes. They focus discussion upon: the need to avoid exploitation of students; the challenges created by the transience of students as well as staff; the challenges faced in collaborative staff-student writing partnerships; and the importance of the attitude with which partnerships are approached.

The book has some shortcomings, for example, there is a reliance on initiatives that were funded through the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) and this has resulted in a lack of examples from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and yet there are some isolated contributions from Australia and Canada. Where many of the authors have sought to contextualise their work, sometimes additional details would have been helpful. Readers are left occasionally unable to judge the level of partnership or 'equality' actually achieved, where important details are missing, such as, knowing how students were selected to be involved in initiatives. There is also little engagement with the more radical critical literature that underpins much of the participation described.

Currently there are not many books dealing with staff-student partnerships in higher education and this volume offers a welcome and useful range of examples to stimulate discussion and encourage academic staff to consider creating opportunities for partnerships. The book is likely to be of interest to staff working in academic and educational development centres and within student unions, but I think the book has the potential to interest all academic staff interested in promoting enquiry based learning, better research-teaching links and the development and engagement of their students through meaningful learning experiences.

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